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Global Networking: Informal Workers Build Solidarity, Power and Representation through Networks and Alliances

Chris Bonner and Françoise Carré



WIEGO Working Papers

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About the Authors:

Chris Bonner is Programme Director of the Organization and Representation Program in WIEGO. She can be contacted at chris.bonner@wiego.org.

Françoise Carré is Research Director at the Center for Social Policy, McCormack Graduate School, University of Massachusetts Boston, and Research Coordinator for WIEGO. She can be contacted at Francoise.Carre@umb.edu.

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WIEGO Secretariat
Harvard Kennedy School,
79 John F. Kennedy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138, USA
www.wiego.org

WIEGO Limited
521 Royal Exchange
Manchester, M2 7EN,
United Kingdom

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Abstract

The paper relies upon field-based knowledge of several global networks of informal workers organizations (associations, cooperatives, or unions) that bargain and/or advocate for their members for recognition and to improve access to markets and space, to improve their earnings, and gain coverage from social protection benefits. Some groups of informal workers (waste pickers, home-based workers, street vendors, domestic workers) have found that global and transnational networking and, importantly, advocacy at the international level, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), have been necessary to strengthen their leverage in national and local settings. The most visible example was the achievement of the International Domestic Workers Convention at the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2011 and a decade earlier the International Convention on Home Work. But how do networks organize themselves and does it matter? What are the implications of these differences for strategy and future impact? The paper reviews several key differences in some of the largest global networks of informal workers. We find that these networks vary in their historical roots and political traditions, and these have implications for how they structure themselves. Some have a clear union model while others have a non-governmental organization (NGO) base, and yet others adopted a social movement structure. In addition, and importantly, the venues or forums in which they can bring their claims and operate—whether labour related or connected to environmental issues—in turn affect directly their strategies and gains.

Introduction

Over the past decade, informal workers mainly in the global South and their organizations have joined and launched global networks of solidarity, advocacy, and militancy. Informal workers, the main urban categories of whom include street vendors, domestic workers, waste pickers, and home-based workers, are seldom recognized as “workers” for purposes of national policy on labour or social protection. They are rarely recognized as producers or providers of services for purposes of urban planning and frequently struggle to achieve viable earnings. Faced with these roadblocks, they have nevertheless formed their own local or national organizations.

The need for recognition and effective advocacy has also prompted them to seek access to global forums and institutions to gain leverage in more local or regional settings and to grow as organizations. There are global and transnational regional networks of informal workers’ organizations (associations, unions, or cooperatives) that are now advocating and sometimes negotiating for their members to gain recognition and to improve access to markets and space, to improve earnings, and to gain access to social protection.

Several groups of informal workers have found transnational networking and, importantly, advocacy at the international level, such as the ILO, to be necessary. The most visible example was the achievement of the International Domestic Workers Convention at the International Labour Conference (ILC) in 2011 (C189) and, more than a decade earlier, the Home Work Convention (C177).

But how do networks organize themselves? What paths led to their current form? How do they differ in how they organize themselves? And what are the implications of these differences for strategy and impact?

The paper relies upon field-based knowledge of global networks of informal worker organizations that deal with street vendors, domestic workers, waste pickers, and home-based workers.¹ Co-author Bonner has partaken in several of these networks as they have developed their structure and acted in international forums.

The paper reviews several key differences in some of these global and transnational networks. Not surprisingly, we find that these networks vary in their historical roots and political traditions, and these differences have implications for how networks structure themselves. Some networks have a clear union model, while others have an NGO base, and yet others have adopted a social movement structure. In addition, and importantly, the venues or forums in which they can bring their claims and operate, whether labour related or connected to environmental issues, in turn affect directly their strategies and gains. Global networks have seized opportunities to become relevant to international discussions when and where they arise; their structure and strategies partly reflects pathways opened and roadblocks bypassed.

Global networks of informal worker organizations are still in formation. The main characteristics and tendencies presented here represent their evolution until now. Yet, being networks of organizations, they are fluid organizations and are not only dependent upon their member organizations but are also affected by the sequencing of opportunities that present themselves. A network’s structure may change as consensus shift, or opportunities appear/disappear, or leading member organizations go through changes themselves. Thus, the exploration and the conclusions drawn as presented here are preliminary and subject to possible alteration in a later analysis.

The next section provides an overview of informal worker organizations. It then outlines the reasons that have made informal worker organizations seek activity on a global scale and form global and transnational regional networks.

The following section provides, first, a typology of five types of networks, outlining their primary structure and goals. It next reviews the main characteristics of four of these networks and then turns to detailed accounts of each.

The final section reviews opportunities that have given rise to global networks as well as the particular challenges these networks currently face.

¹ Other global networks include the World Forum of Fisher Folk and Via Campesina, the world movement of agricultural workers (peasant farmers).

Moving Beyond the Local: Global Networks and Transnational Advocacy

Informal Worker Organizing

Informal workers organize into associations, unions, cooperatives, and self-help groups “with all sorts of variants and transitional arrangements between one form and another” (Bonner and Spooner 2012).² They also organize into local, national, and regional (multi-country) networks. Simply put, they organize to achieve voice, visibility, and validity, that is, visibility in all spheres of activity and policy (legal and regulatory) areas that have bearing on their work and lives and to gain acceptance of their concerns as valid. Directly or indirectly, improving their economic circumstances and countering threats to their livelihoods form an overarching goal.

The forms that informal worker (IW) organizations take are varied and, in and of themselves, are the subjects of existing and ongoing research³ and are not explored in detail here; this paper focuses on global networks.

In brief, almost all, if not all, membership-based organizations (MBOs) of informal workers⁴ share the following goals in different mixes and with different emphases: representation (voice); improving informal workers’ economic position; negotiation and collective bargaining; accessing or providing services; mobilizing around issues or for political power and for social inclusion; and solidarity.

The strategies these organizations adopt best help illustrate what organizations do and how they differ. Here, “strategy” is used fairly loosely to mean the choice of a primary approach for exerting power (political or economic) or voice on behalf of informal workers (in this view, social insurance for informal workers is a means to sustain economic power).

IW organizations may commonly use four types of strategies: negotiation and collective bargaining strategies with local and national governments; economic development strategies; market strategies necessitating negotiation approaches; and access to credit and social protection. There are also complex approaches such as those developed by SEWA (Self Employed Women’s Association) of India that combine a “struggle” component with an “economic development” one (Carré 2013). Bonner and Spooner (2010) note that SEWA, a trade union with over 1.7 million members, has a complex struggle strategy (organizing, negotiating, and advocating). But within its multifaceted family of sister organizations, SEWA also comprises over 100 producer and marketing cooperatives run by its members. SEWA has formed a federation of cooperatives with a broad economic and social development as well as a trade agenda.

Why Transnational Organizing and Advocacy?

Why would IW organizations whose workers earn livelihoods in very local ways, whose access to space in order to work or trade is primarily governed by local regulation and policies, and whose services and products seemingly are local—with the exception of industrial outworkers and some agricultural workers—conceive of and join networks with a global reach?

Global networks enable IW organizations to access representation and means of advocacy in international forums and, conversely, boost national and local efforts. As Mitullah (2010) notes in reference to KENASVIT (Kenya National Association of Street Vendors and Informal Traders), an affiliate of StreetNet International,

² For details, see Bonner and Spooner (2012). For a typology of types of organizations, see Carré 2013.

³ Chen et al. 2007; Bonner and Spooner 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Rosaldo 2013; Schurman and Eaton 2012; Mather 2012.

⁴ Defined by Chen et al. 2007 as MBOs of the poor, that is “those in which the members elect their leader and which operate on democratic principles that hold the elected officers accountable to the general membership” (p.4). HomeNet South Asia has coined the term “membership-based network” (MBN) for multi-organization and multi-country structures.

“as local associations of workers come together and engage in joint action with the support of transnational organizations, they become visible and are recognized by governments and other development partners. This recognition earns them inclusion in local and national processes which influence their working environment and livelihood”.

An important part of the context for the formation of global networks was the growing recognition by the ILO, starting in the 1990s, of the need to address the rapid informalization of work. The context for formation of these networks also included the employment and income implications of “globalization” in all its manifestations. Globalization has meant not only the globalization of production and markets but also the fact that ideas, technologies, and systems are rapidly transmitted and replicated by business and governments thus requiring workers’ organizations to do the same. For example, privatization of municipal services and new waste disposal technologies have influenced municipalities across the globe, and local and multinational corporations have moved in quickly to secure the cash in trash.⁵

For IW organizations, developing global solidarity and capacity for advocacy to achieve improvements serves to support, supplement, and occasionally trigger action in local and national settings—particularly in cases where these settings have not been propitious for doing so. In national settings, most informal workers have not been seen as workers covered by labour standards and social protection, making them eligible for union organization and collective bargaining (Bonner and Spooner 2011a and 2011b, Schurman and Eaton et al. 2012). Nor have their activities been seen as legitimate economic activities requiring public infrastructure that facilitates access to markets as is, for example, the case with street vendors.

For IW organizations and their members, advocacy in international venues is greatly enhanced by the formation of global networks. Exactly how international venues are used for advocacy and eventually for negotiation around IW issues, varies with the worker group concerned, the conditions of their work, and the international venue.

Informal workers’ and their organizations’ main purposes in acting globally, particularly in policy venues, have been first and foremost to be recognized as workers needing labour standards and social protection. Once they are recognized as workers, international labour standards may apply to them although standard setting has been most relevant for those who are considered employees rather than self-employed.⁶

International standards have relevance for the governments of low and middle countries in particular.⁷ National governments may enact legislation to comply with a convention, for example, and international standards may act as norms for which organizations can advocate and bargain for in national and local settings as well as at the level of the industrial sector. The ILO is one place where national governments can be pressured to open policy discussions on informal work activities, the status of informal workers, and their access to social protection. For IW organizations, gaining visibility in discussions—even when not considered the subject of standard setting discussions—carries weight in negotiations with public authorities on policies and regulation just as it also serves to mobilize members around specific demands and goals. The ability to argue for a level of social protection that is internationally recognized as a basic worker right plays a similar role.

Where labour standards are considered, domestic workers and homeworker groups have engaged with standards setting processes at the ILO. Domestic workers who can claim employee status can appeal most easily to tripartite standards setting processes. Other groups of workers who are “officially” defined as self-employed, such as street vendors, have advocated within this tripartite process to be recognized as workers deserving of policy attention—without being included as specific subjects of standard setting discussions. Groups of workers operating seemingly independently, such as waste pickers, have begun to insert their concerns in discussions on sustainability and green jobs but not in standard setting processes per se.

⁵ Waste pickers have long recognized that “trash is cash”. There is a Kenyan song by young hip-hoppers of the same name. See <http://www.inspiration-green.com/trash-is-cash-video.html>.

⁶ The ILO Governing Body has put on the agenda of the ILC for 2014 and 2015, “Facilitating gradual transitions from the informal economy to the formal economy” as standard setting item (Recommendation). The implications of this for informal own account workers we have yet to understand.

⁷ The United States, however, has refused to ratify a number of important conventions.

Beyond and in addition to advocacy on labour standards and social protection, IW organizations, particularly those of the self-employed, have formed networks in order to engage more effectively in other international venues, be they focused on the environment or economic development. Particular international debates offer opportunities for IW organizations to step up and gain a foothold in policy discussions with ramifications for how their members work and the future of that work. The clearest example of this strategy is the engagement of waste picker IW organizations with the global environmental movement. These organizations have seized the opportunities that the international attention to climate change has created. Making WP work visible and highlighting its contributions to several concerns of the environmental movement—resource use, sustainability and climate change—have enabled these IW organizations to significantly raise the visibility of this kind of work. In turn, this visibility has enabled these previously unrecognized workers to be valued and respected—a salient issue for them. As waste picker leader Nohra Padilla said regarding the recognition of Bogota’s informal recyclers as a valued part of the waste management system, “recyclers on every continent, in every country we know about, are saying: ‘yes, it’s possible, we also want that’. This is not only a triumph for Bogota’s recyclers; it is an achievement for recyclers around the world. We thank the city, because it has begun to recognize us and to say: recyclers have rights” (Vieira 2013).

As will be seen in cases discussed below, advocating for an international convention or for recognition of informal worker activities in a production or recycling structure also serves as a tool that solidifies modes of advocacy, leadership skills, and member mobilization. It also promotes empowerment, an important component for women who constitute the bulk or significant proportion of the membership and have limited experience of public voice and recognition. Clearly, these outcomes can also be achieved in national advocacy. Still, there remains the fact that policies that are universal in scope and have a potential impact on informal workers are easier to advocate for once international standards or guiding principles and criteria have been set.

In addition to these concrete motivations, IW organizations also note that the work entailed in participation in a global network enables organizers, leaders, and active members to learn about and exchange information on strategies, successes, and failures as well as to glean important information on the context for their work and its future direction.⁸ Importantly, the information acquired through networks is used by leadership in engagements with local authorities, including citing success with particular approaches in other countries or, for example, organizing visits by local officials to other countries. For example, Indian government officials went with a delegation of waste pickers to Brazil. In another instance, a municipal Colombian official accompanied the waste picker leader, Nohra Padilla, who received the 2013 Goldman Environmental Prize for South and Central America, to the US award ceremony at Padilla’s request. Padilla thought this would influence the local government positively toward the Colombian waste picker movement.

Some of the networks also have access to sufficient resources to provide practical assistance to national IW organizations in support of their goals. Practical assistance may include access to research, education resources, and other means for capacity building. Most of the global networks of IW organizations currently in existence access support from groups such as the global-research-action-policy network WIEGO.⁹

The Role of National and Sub-Global Transnational Networks and Alliances

This paper focuses primarily on global networking, yet it is important to note that IW organizations have, in many countries and at some times, come together to form local and national networks, regional networks, national unions, and even structured federations to strengthen their advocacy and negotiating power with national governments in particular. These networks, often form the primary membership of the global or regional multi-country networks but their formation may not in all cases precede joining a global network. In this paper, we note two multi-country regional networks (HomeNet South Asia and the Latin American Waste Pickers Network, or RedLacre in Spanish), but otherwise we do not explore the features of regional networks as a whole.

⁸ Some organizations of home-based workers have considered exploring supply chains (e.g. in the garment or horticulture industries) of contracted workers.

⁹ WIEGO (www.wiego.org) has coordinated and supported most of the activities of the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers.

Different Kinds of Global and Transnational Networks

Overview

Based on recent experiences of networks and network building amongst four groups of informal workers supported by WIEGO, this section examines in more detail the different kinds of transnational networks¹⁰ (models) that have emerged, their main goals, and the organizing and advocacy strategies they use.

Transnational organizing amongst informal workers can arguably be traced back to the founding of SEWA in the 1970s and its recognition as a trade union by the International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Association (now the IUF) in 1983, when it was accepted as an affiliate. In the same decade, domestic workers' organizations in Latin America formed the multi-country regional alliance CONLACTRAHO. In the 1990s, home-based workers came to the fore, organizing into HomeNet International to advocate for home-based workers and engage in the negotiations at the ILC that resulted in the adoption of the Convention on Home Work (C177) in 1996. WIEGO itself developed from these activities, forming as a project in 1997 to provide research, statistics, technical, and advocacy support for SEWA and allies who were at the forefront of promoting the organization of informal workers. It was in this late 1990s period that the ILO began a process of engagement around informal workers leading up to the 2002 ILC discussion and ground breaking "Conclusions Regarding Decent Work and the Informal Economy" (ILO 2002a), making this a strategic moment for transnational network building and alliances. Over the next decade, the transnational networks under discussion were all formed or consolidated: StreetNet International (2002), HomeNet South Asia (2000), Latin American Waste Pickers Network (RedLacre) (2005), International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN) (2008/9), and the Global Alliance of Waste pickers (2009).¹¹ More recently, informal networks of domestic workers have emerged across Africa and the Caribbean, and HomeNet East Europe has been established.

Typology of Five Networks

Table 1 below summarizes some of the major similarities and differences between five networks, three of which are global networks and two of which are regional (transnational) networks. Whilst all the networks are based on distinct informal worker occupational groups—with the exception of home-based workers where the defining feature is place of work—they vary in scope, structure, governance, administration, specific goals, strategies, and stage of development.

Most importantly, in our view, the networks under discussion vary in their roots and political traditions. Also significant is the fact that the venues or forums in which they can bring their claims and operate—whether related to labour concerns or connected to environment and sustainability issues—in turn directly affect their strategies and gains.

This typology of global and regional networks compares them across five dimensions: scope, structure and membership, governance, administration, and financial autonomy. Network development is a dynamic process that can rapidly change, especially in its formative stage as lessons are learned, funding fluctuates, internal or external challenges arise, and support and alliances change. As we will illustrate below, most of the networks are in a state of transition because they are still in formation—though it may be in the nature of such networks to be fluid. As of late 2013, one network has relatively stable governance and administrative structures; one network is in the process of becoming a formally constituted federation; one network is moving from an NGO-dominated structure towards one based on decision making by its MBO members; one network is an unstructured alliance with uncertain future; and the fifth network is an established but fluid movement. We characterize each network as emblematic of certain organizing traditions as well as the product of particular circumstances.

¹⁰ We use the term network generically to describe a diverse set of formations, differently named as alliance, network, federation, association, or movement, but which have in common the bringing together of local or national organizations of informal workers from a particular occupational group to engage with each other around a set of common issues and activities (see discussion in Bonner and Spooner 2012: 94).

¹¹ For details, see Bonner and Spooner 2012: 23 and <http://www.wiego.org>.

Table 1 : Global and Transnational-Regional Networks: different models

Trade Union Model					
Name & Description	Scope	Status and membership	Governance	Administration	Financial viability/autonomy
<p>StreetNet International</p> <p>Interim – 2000 Launch – 2002</p>	Global	Established, independent, registered Membership: national MBOs or alliances of MBOs	Constitution and policies adopted by affiliates at Congress Democratic decision making structures with leadership elections every 3 years	Strong central coordination and administration supported by bottom-up regional structures each managed by a Regional Focal Point, which is a StreetNet affiliate identified and selected by all the affiliates in the region	Member dues and external funding (majority) Exploring options for self-funding Not self-sufficient
Trade Union Supported Model					
Name & Description	Scope	Status and membership	Governance	Administration	Financial viability/autonomy
<p>International Domestic Workers Network</p> <p>Interim – 2008/9 Launch – October 2013</p>	Global	Developing: in transition from informal to established Based in the Global Union Federation-IUF: with special project status Membership: being formalized. National and local MBOs	Interim set of rules Decision making by appointed Steering Committee, with regional spread. Reports to IUF Executive Committee	Central coordination and administration IUF providing financial management and admin back-up Global coordination of activities by International Coordinator based in Hong Kong with support from regional coordinators	Until 2012 external funding only 2013 member dues + external funding (majority) Not self-sufficient

Table 1 (continued): Global and Transnational-Regional Networks: different models

NGO Model					
Name & Description	Scope	Status and membership	Governance	Administration	Financial viability/autonomy
<p>HomeNet South Asia</p> <p>Established – 2000 Formal launch – 2007</p>	South Asia Region	Established, independent, registered: transitioning to more democratic structure (2012)	Trust Deed Appointed Board of Trustees: 5 persons. Formal decision making + financial control	Central coordination and administration through Liaison Office, India	External funding with membership fee introduced 2012 Not self-sufficient
Networking Model					
<p>Global Alliance of Waste Pickers</p> <p>2009 – by meeting decision</p>	Global	Not established Loose alliance of local waste picker organizations (mostly MBOs) and national networks/alliances, supported and funded by WIEGO	No governance structure. Focus on sharing information and joint activities Consultations as needed. Attempts to develop an interim Steering Committee (formal structure) did not succeed	Centrally and regionally coordinated by WIEGO	External funding Not self-sufficient

Table 1 (continued): Global and Transnational-Regional Networks: different models

Social Movement Model					
Name & Description	Scope	Status and membership	Governance	Administration	Financial viability/autonomy
<p>Latin American Waste Picker Network (Red LaCre)</p> <p>2005 – by meeting decision</p>	Latin America Region	Established but fluid with political independence	<p>No constitution</p> <p>Anti-bureaucracy and anti-hierarchy and formal leadership titles</p> <p>Regular assemblies where 3 key committees (secretariat) chosen on rotating basis, based in different countries</p> <p>Decision making by consultation or project management committees</p>	<p>No permanent administrative office or central coordinator (rotates)</p> <p>Reliance on Avina Foundation for financial management and admin functions</p>	<p>External funding</p> <p>Not self-sufficient</p>

Distinctive Features

Trade Union Model: StreetNet International

StreetNet is the most stable and the best established of the global networks (from 2000 with its official launch in 2002). It operates with a trade union-like structure (Global Union Federation-GUF) and strong union influence based on direct representation by national MBOs or alliances. The network is built around solidarity and learning rather than around an issue. It has both a strong center¹² and leader and has promoted women's leadership within. The key venues or forums where StreetNet has acted and exerted influence include the ILC, trade union and civil society "left" forums such as the World Social Forum and, more recently, economic development forums such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC). The network leadership has been effective at seizing opportunities. For example, it has made strategic use of the International Labour Conference and mounted global campaigns around common concerns such as with the World Class Cities for All Campaign, which targets the common policies of removal of vendors from public spaces when major events take place (e.g. World Cup).

Trade Union Supported Model: International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN)

The network is young but has rapidly developed towards formalization of its structure and governance.¹³ From the start, it has been inside the union movement with its unique relationship with a GUF, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF). The IDWN has a mixed membership of unions and associations. A strong union influence exists within it from some regions such as Africa and Latin America. Due in part to the status of domestic workers as employees (in private households), the IDWN has been able to access the standards-setting processes at the ILO and to use these to mobilize domestic workers, to build alliances, and, at the same time, build the network. The IDWN illustrates the importance of building capacity and confidence among women leaders. The International Labour Conference has been the main global forum for IDWN advocacy. Domestic work is a well-supported cause internationally, and therefore the IDWN has many allies beyond labour (among human rights, migrant organizations, religious organizations). So far, the network has been able to maintain mobilization among its members after the passage of the ILO Convention on Domestic Work (C189) by taking up ratification and national legislation as a unifying campaign.

Networking Model: Global Alliance of Waste Pickers

The first world gathering of waste pickers took place in March 2008. So far, the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers (GAWP) has not chosen a certain path on structure and how to formally come together globally. Importantly, network members have focused on sharing and advocacy rather than on institution building. The base organizations—mostly cooperatives and "coop-type" associations—focus on collectivization of resources or services to maximize economic opportunity and livelihoods and to enter into arrangements with municipalities. When combined, these organizations have strong social movement influences based on struggle for recognition and social and economic inclusion, a pattern that influences their approach to networking. To date, the global linkages that the GAWP has established are primarily with environmental justice organizations for recognition of the role of waste pickers in mitigating climate change (including the demand for a share in the green climate change fund) and of their contribution to sustainable environments. Key global forums for advocacy for network members have been the UN Conferences on Climate Change and Sustainable Development. Given big differences in developmental stages, political traditions, and potential for earnings (and therefore class distinctions) between Latin American, Asian, and African waste pickers, the main challenge facing waste picker organizations in their global networking is that of forging a common identity and shared political agenda (waste pickers in countries with active manufacturing sectors find greater demand for recyclable products than those in countries without).

¹² It operates with one central office and three regional organizers (Africa, Americas and Spain, Asia and Eastern Europe).

¹³ Editor's note: The International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) was officially launched at a founding Congress, 26-28 October 2013, where its constitution was adopted, membership fees agreed and office bearers elected. See www.idwn.info.

Social Movement Model: Latin American Waste Pickers Network (RedLacre)

This network is based on a social movement philosophy and form. It self-defines as being anti-bureaucracy and hierarchies and, so far, has had little connection to, or support from, trade unions in the region. Therefore, it has no traditional office holders (e.g. no president); its secretariat is divided amongst three countries, rotates every two to three years, and is appointed at large conferences/assemblies. The primary foci of RedLacre are learning and sharing to influence governments, and building solidarity. Its leadership is drawn exclusively from waste pickers, but the network is dependent on NGOs, especially the AVINA Foundation,¹⁴ for administrative and financial management. RedLacre has not focused specifically on regional forums for engagement but rather on solidarity amongst members. From time to time, it has engaged transnationally through bringing key players to their own conferences (below, we discuss RedLacre's activities as they relate to the GAWP and do not provide a free-standing case study for it).

NGO-Based Model: HomeNet South Asia

HomeNet South Asia is a regional transnational network that is relatively established but is undergoing a major transition from its NGO-type structure and governance model to one that is based more on democratic decision making by MBOs of home-based workers (HBWs). Historically, it has been characterized by a strong NGO influence as a result of weak, often non-existent, unions (apart from SEWA) or self-organizing MBOs. Its primary focus is on sharing and learning across the region (which encompasses large numbers of HBWs), influencing national government policies through regional activities and profile, and engaging with the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Four Case Studies

In this section, we develop at greater length the story, goals, achievements, and challenges faced by four global networks of primary interest: StreetNet, the IDWN, the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers, and HomeNet South Asia.¹⁵

Trade Union Model: StreetNet International

The members of StreetNet International (unions, associations, alliances) directly organize street vendors, market vendors, and hawkers (mobile vendors). As noted earlier, StreetNet has strong trade union features adapted to suit its constituency. Its founding International Coordinator, a long-time trade unionist, has played an important role in this regard. The linkages that she in particular has been able to develop with the trade union movement have provided recognition and legitimacy for StreetNet amongst unions and within the Workers' Bureau, ACTRAV, at the ILO. In turn, these linkages have encouraged trade unions in some regions to actively promote organizing in the informal economy. StreetNet's primary venues are labour and economic development forums, both global and more recently regional, and global and regional civil society forums (e.g. World Social Forum, regional Social Forums and Peoples' Forums). StreetNet engages with the ILO through participation in the standard setting tripartite conferences (ILC). It is able to influence outcomes although its members, street vendors, have not specifically been the subject of standard setting.

Street Vendors and their Organizations

Street vendors sell goods or services in streets and other related public spaces, including markets. Most street vendors are self-employed, either with or without employees. Many vendors work as contributing family members, and some work as employees of or on commission from informal or even formal enterprises.

¹⁴ A Latin American Foundation dedicated to sustainable development with roots in the corporate world.

¹⁵ Fully extended case studies in progress also include a history of each of the networks (Bonner, 2013 unpublished manuscript, WIEGO).

In most big cities of the developing world, there are thousands of street vendors. The share of street vendors in total non-agricultural employment was estimated to be between two and nine per cent (ILO 2002b: 52). Recent estimates for India indicate that street vendors accounted for 11 per cent of urban employment in 2010 (ILO-WIEGO forthcoming). In many African cities, the number of street vendors was estimated to be much higher (for example, 15 per cent of urban employment in South Africa overall) (ibid). Earlier estimates found the number of street vendors to be 16.4 per cent in Bamako, Mali and 20 per cent in Lomé, Togo (2001/2003).¹⁶ In many countries, especially in Africa and Central America, a majority of street vendors are women, who typically earn less than men.

Street vendors organize primarily into small local associations and increasingly into trade unions. Local associations are formed around workplace areas, such as a market or street; others are organized around the products they sell. These associations operate to enable members to access space, welfare support, and savings and credit, to defend members against harassment and bribery, and to engage with authorities. Area or city alliances may form to strengthen vendors' collective action and engagement with municipal authorities. In several countries, vendors' organizations have combined into national alliances or have formed national unions or a mix of both in order to raise their visibility and voice and to advocate for national policies and laws to protect and advance the rights of vendors, particularly access to vending space. National organization also allows them to have a voice in tripartite negotiation forums in some countries on broader social and economic issues, through trade union affiliation or in alliance with trade unions. For example, in South Africa, StreetNet participates in the Community Constituency of NEDLAC (National Economic, Development, and Labour Council), which usually operates in alliance with the Labour Caucus of NEDLAC.

Status and Structure

StreetNet celebrated its 10th Anniversary in November 2012. It has 48 member organizations representing 567,106 members; fifty per cent of these organizations are unions or union federations. Africa has the largest number of affiliates at 27; Americas follow with 11 (one in USA), Asia with six, and Europe with four. This spread is not surprising given the large numbers of street vendors in Africa although affiliations from Asia are lower than would be expected (Horn 2013).

StreetNet operates as an independent organization, governed by its own constitution as approved by its members. It has the support of WIEGO on request. Its highest decision making body is its Congress, held every three years. All affiliates are represented at the Congress, which elects the governing bodies and office bearers from amongst delegates. Member organizations pay an annual fee to StreetNet. However, this source of income is insufficient to support the administration, governance and programs of StreetNet, and the Network remains dependent on external funding. Interestingly, in anticipation of a substantial decrease in external funding, StreetNet has set in motion a proactive program to try and move towards self-sufficiency.

Goals and Achievements

The aim of StreetNet is to promote the exchange of information and ideas on critical issues facing street vendors, market vendors, and hawkers. The aim is also to promote exchange on practical organizing and advocacy strategies so that member organizations should gain an understanding of their common problems and develop new ideas for strengthening their organizing and advocacy efforts. It aims to organize international campaigns to promote policies and actions that can contribute to improving the lives of millions of street and market vendors and hawkers around the world.¹⁷

Within this broad framing of goals are some key objectives and principles that include women's leadership, a long term objective of economic transformation,¹⁸ and achieving visibility for (mostly) self-employed street vendors as workers in labour and social forums. From the beginning, StreetNet has had a policy of ensuring equal representation of women in its governing structures and in all its activities.

¹⁶ <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/occupational-groups/street-vendors>.

¹⁷ See <http://www.streetnet.org.za>.

¹⁸ Its long-term objective is set out in the Congress (2010) resolution on the Social Solidarity Economy (<http://www.streetnet.org.za/docs/books/2012/en/Resolution%2019.pdf>).

StreetNet has focused much of its attention on and has been most successful with building its membership and internal organization and that of its affiliates and their leadership through information exchange, direct capacity building activities, and support through international and national activities. It has also focused on developing relationships with union bodies such as International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) regional organizations and GUFs, resulting in their adopting a more proactive approach to organizing informal workers.

StreetNet has strived to make vendors and their issues visible in a variety of international and regional forums of labour and civil society of the “left”. Whilst vendors, being own account workers, have not been the subject of standard setting at the ILO to date, StreetNet has used the ILC processes strategically. It was formally accredited to participate as an international NGO on the ILO’s “Special List” in 2004 and has been able to use its Coordinator’s strong relationship with unions and the fact that many of its affiliates are unions to gain access and speaking rights in the Workers’ Group discussions and to insert informal workers into the text of various ILC instruments. The latest example of this is StreetNet’s participation in the Committee on Social Protection Floors at the 2012 ILC. StreetNet, with support from WIEGO, prepared a Platform document on Social Protection Floors for the Working Poor (StreetNet/WIEGO 2012). Linking the international with the local is a two-way process; in this case, affiliates were consulted on the development of the Platform, and then informed and encouraged to advocate for its implementation in their countries.

Influences and Challenges

Street vendors are perhaps the most visible of all groups of informal workers, especially in many cities of the developing world. While their history of collective organization into associations is a strength, this history comes with some liabilities. These associations often do not have a tradition of democratic functioning: there may be no agreed rules (constitution) or, where these exist, low levels of compliance and leaders who have not been elected or are not subject to recall (Roever 2007). Still, in the early establishment phase of StreetNet, vendors’ visibility and rudimentary organizational base were important in moving relatively quickly to a formal organization. However, within some affiliates, these traditions linger on.

As noted above, the trade union influences and connections, especially those of its founding International Coordinator, have played a major role in the way StreetNet is structured and governed and in its programs and activities. These connections have helped it gain acceptance by many in the international trade union movement, the ILO, and within civil society organizations as a legitimate worker organization and a voice of street vendors. This acceptance is borne out by its official recognition by the ILO and by its invitations to participate in the ITUC Congresses in an observer capacity.

While StreetNet places emphasis on gender equality in all its activities and on strong women’s leadership at all levels, encouraging its affiliates to do the same is an ongoing challenge. This is problematic in a sector where women are represented in substantial numbers but where men tend to dominate trade in higher earning segments and often within the associations. The early adoption of a resolution ensuring majority women representation in leadership structures was strategically important, and was due to the foresight and conviction of founder members and leaders. Nevertheless, despite carefully laying the ground, StreetNet has not yet had a woman President.

After ten years, StreetNet is beyond the establishment phase. At its 2013 Congress, the Coordinator identified a number of challenges to be tackled. Two challenges stand out: internally, financial sustainability and externally achieving influence on urban policies and development planning in as many countries as possible.

Together with SEWA and other union allies and with the support of WIEGO, StreetNet has been a pioneering organization for the global movement of informal workers. It has built its membership, structures, and leadership slowly and thoroughly and has raised the global visibility not only of street vendors but of informal workers as a whole.

Trade Union Supported Network: International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN)

The IDWN gathers membership-based domestic workers' organizations (trade unions, associations, and national alliances) into an international network. It provides an unusual and probably unique model of international organizing due to its structure and the circumstances of its advocacy. The IUF provides an organizational base for the network without requiring unions involved to affiliate.¹⁹ The second salient feature of the IDWN is that from the beginning it had a clear goal around which to mobilize globally—the struggle for a Domestic Workers ILO Convention—and a clear global forum in which to engage, which resulted in an early victory. This victory has provided a powerful organizing impetus and has been instrumental in the IDWN quickly gaining wide recognition and legitimacy. The network is led by women and has strongly expressed views on the need for domestic workers to speak for themselves, which it has been able to put into practice in an international forum.

Domestic Workers and their Organizations

Most domestic workers are in an employment relationship or in multiple employment relationships (with households), albeit of unusual kinds. This enables them to insert their claims more readily than other groups of informal workers in forums such as the ILO. There are over 50 million domestic workers worldwide, 83 per cent of whom are women (ILO 2013a), and numbers are growing. A substantial number are migrant workers, from Asia to Europe, from Latin America to USA, within continents, and internally from rural to urban areas. Domestic workers often suffer abuse, gender discrimination, and poor working and living conditions, and their work is unrecognized and under-valued. Many human rights abuses are recorded by global NGOs such as Human Rights Watch and Slavery International.

A relatively small but growing number of domestic workers belong to worker organizations although there is a long history of domestic workers' unions in some parts of the world, notably in parts of Africa and Latin America. However, when domestic workers organize, they do so in many different ways according to circumstances and need. For example, they may organize initially around their identity as migrant workers from a particular country, as a faith-based, community or women's group, or their organization may be spawned from an NGO. These groups may remain as loose associations, but some make the transition to a fully-fledged trade union or trade union-like organization. However, for the most part, domestic workers' organizations are small and fragile and require ongoing support. According to the IDWN, the number of domestic workers' organizations is growing, particularly since the campaign for C189 and its subsequent adoption.

Structure and Governance

As its base, the IDWN's diverse group of organizations primarily includes trade unions of domestic workers or mixed unions with domestic workers forming one segment. The network is in the process of transition from an informal network of independent organizations, loosely governed through a Steering Committee of representatives from domestic workers' organizations from different regions, to a formally constituted federation (i.e. implying a federated structure). Its Founding Congress is scheduled for the end of October 2013, and it is currently engaged in a process of registering unions and associations (MBOs) representing domestic workers as formal members and developing a constitution for discussion and adoption at the Congress. Formal members pay an entrance fee, currently set at US \$20, until a decision on membership dues is taken at the forthcoming Congress.

IDWN combines strong central coordination with decentralized regional activities. It has an International Coordinator in Hong Kong who is supported by the IUF administrative and political structures in Geneva.

¹⁹ The IDWN has the status of a self-funded project within the IUF, reporting to its Executive.

Regional Coordinators are based in Mexico, Tanzania, and Hong Kong. Activists from inside existing organizations coordinate activities in the Caribbean and North America, and the WIEGO Europe Advisor does so in Europe.

Whilst the IDWN has a clear identity and its own structures, it is politically (and administratively) located in the IUF, which has domestic workers in its jurisdiction with some of its affiliates organizing domestic workers. Not all these affiliates are active in the IDWN, nor are all the organizations in the IDWN affiliates of the IUF. The IUF Gender and Equality Officer has responsibility for the IDWN in relation to the IUF and plays an active strategic and practical support role. The IUF also manages the finances of the Network, employs its coordinators, and provides administrative support. WIEGO plays an important role by providing financial resources through multi-organization global projects along with strategic and technical support. In the lead up to the adoption of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention (C189) in 2011, a WIEGO team member was seconded to the IUF to act as International Coordinator of the IDWN, playing a leading role in developing IDWN and in its campaign for a convention.

Goals and Achievements

The immediate goal of the IDWN was to secure a Domestic Workers Convention that would include all of its demands (Mather 2010), the most essential being recognition of domestic workers as workers, thus having the same rights as all other workers. Unrecognized and under-valued as women and domestic workers, and ignored or at best spoken for by (usually) male trade union leaders, their secondary, but related goal, was to ensure that domestic workers, mainly women, led the campaign and represented and spoke for themselves in all forums, especially at the negotiations at the ILC. The slogan “we want to speak for ourselves” became important in the campaign.

The broad goals of the IDWN are as follows: 1) strong democratic domestic workers’ organization to protect domestic workers’ rights; 2) change power relations in society to promote gender equality and human rights for the benefit of domestic workers; 3) democracy and accountability at the organization level; and 4) solidarity with other labour movements (IDWN).

The IDWN developed strategies for engaging in the ILO process at every step in the campaign for a convention and in as many countries as possible. Given the enormity of the task, it was agreed that developing the structure and democratic governance of the network would be something to be addressed after achieving this major goal.

The campaign resulted in victory with the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention (C189) and accompanying Resolution (R201) by overwhelming majorities. IDWN and base organizations employed many different and creative strategies during the campaign, and linkages were made with other organizations supporting the cause such as international and local NGOs and church groups. The ITUC and key people in the ILO were strong allies, and MBOs aligned to the IDWN were able to gain practical support from trade union national centers in many countries. MBOs allied with the IDWN were also able to influence their governments to support their demands. Importantly, they were able to use the campaign as an organizing and mobilizing tool resulting in the strengthening of domestic workers’ unions and MBOs in many countries and to provide a focus for global organizing and global solidarity (Bonner and Pape 2012).

Building on this momentum, the IDWN and member organizations together with the ITUC and civil society organizations have been campaigning not only for ratification of C189 in many countries but also for changes to national legislation with some success. On 5 September 2013, the Convention came into force. Eight countries had fully completed the ratification process, whilst several others had agreed to ratify and are proceeding through their parliamentary processes. Many other countries have improved legislations or are in the process of doing so (ILO 2013c).

Key Influences and Challenges

From the start, the IDWN was linked to the labour movement. Despite the initial suggestions for a loose and mixed network with a more NGO-type structure, the predominance of trade unionists in the Steering Committee and amongst the technical support group along with the IDWN's position inside of the IUF meant that the tendency towards a trade union type structure led by workers themselves emerged. This structure was reinforced by the strongly expressed need for recognition as women and workers willing and capable of representing themselves. Given the strong trade union presence in its growing membership (48 organizations, of which 36 are trade unions, had been accepted as members as of September 2013) and the strong trade union roots and links, it is likely that the Founding Congress will result in a model closely resembling that of a trade union body but being more flexible and innovative in order to adapt to the particular situation and needs of domestic workers.

The link with trade unions has also been an important factor in the IDWN's ability to participate in and influence the ILO process, thus providing a global organizing purpose. Its IUF base has given the IDWN legitimacy and enabled the leadership to learn about the process and to get access to main players in the ILO and in the international trade union movement. In different countries, access to national trade union centers—key players in the ILC—was facilitated by links and affiliations of “members” and coordinators. Conversely, recognition by the ILO of the need for international standards for domestic workers opened up space for domestic workers' organizations outside of the formal labour movement to gain legitimacy, build links, and gain the support of trade unions. For example, the AFL-CIO and the National Domestic Workers Alliance in the USA signed a partnership agreement prior to the 2011 ILC discussions.

The status of domestic workers as “employees” was critical in achieving the strong support of the trade unions, and thus in their gaining access to the standard setting process of the ILO—an advantage over those groups of informal workers who are self-employed as until recently the tripartite standard setting process has been focused almost exclusively on employees.

The IDWN was able to capitalize on this globally, using the focused campaign to organize around and build its base, increase its profile and gain wide recognition, strengthen its relationship and engage in joint actions with the labour movement, build alliances with and support from civil society organizations, capture the sympathy of the public, and attract resources. It was able to transcend the gender barriers and patriarchal attitudes found in much of the formal trade union movement and allow voices previously unheard to be heard.

The success and rapid development of the IDWN so far is not without future challenges. Although it is likely that the IDWN Congress will endorse the proposal that member organizations pay dues, the income produced will not allow for financial autonomy. External funds will still be needed to finance most of its work. As with all organizing undertakings, a number of unknowns affect prospects for the network. Funders' commitment might alter as the high profile and excitement around the Convention and its ratification fade. Other supporters inside the labour movement, too, might move onto other issues, and domestic workers' organizations themselves may be hard pressed to sustain current levels of activity.

The IDWN's immediate hurdle to surmount is that of consolidating a democratic, worker-led organization that can transcend cultural, language, political and organizational differences and build solidarity, and which has a focus on achieving gains that link global efforts with local concerns.

Networking Model: Global Alliance of Waste Pickers

The Global Alliance of Waste Pickers brings waste picker organizations—cooperatives, unions, associations, and networks—from countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa into an informal networking process. WIEGO has supported this process from 2007 by mobilizing substantial financial resources and by initiating, facilitating, and coordinating activities, including employing key personnel to do so. The uniqueness of this network lies in its focus on process (networking) rather than form (a formal network) and on external issues and challenges rather than institution building. It is also unusual in that a global alliance was first forged with environmental justice NGOs rather than with the labour movement. The GAWP has used the United Nations Climate Change Conferences (2009, 2010, 2011) and the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (2012) as opportunities to promote the role of waste pickers as important players in mitigating climate change and contributing to a sustainable environment. It has used the World Urban Forums to promote waste pickers' right to be included in urban policy development. Some waste picker organizations have managed to bring these same issues into their local demands for recognition and integration into municipal solid waste management systems.

Waste Pickers and their Organizations

The term “waste pickers” describes people who reclaim “reusable and recyclable materials from what others have cast aside as waste” (Samson 2009: 1). They range from poor people searching for necessities to informal collectors of recyclable materials (plastics, cardboard, or metal), who sort and sell to middlemen or businesses. Most waste pickers are own account workers, working individually or in family groups. Increasingly, but still in a minority, are those who have formed collectives (cooperatives and associations) for sharing facilities, processing, and collective selling. Categories of waste pickers encompass the following: those who reclaim recyclable materials for selling from landfills (far from city centers); street waste pickers who reclaim recyclables from mixed waste from bins, bags, dumpsters, and, less often, segregated waste; waste pickers with arrangements to collect from commercial or office buildings; and still others who are itinerant buyers, collecting from households for payment.

Where data are available, waste pickers represent under one per cent of the urban workforce (ILO-WIEGO forthcoming). Recent data from the ILO indicate that there are about 24 million workers in the recycling industry of whom 80 per cent are informal workers (ILO 2013b). But data collection on waste pickers is just beginning, and available data are likely to undercount waste pickers. A significant number of waste pickers are women, and some are children. In some Indian cities, for example, about 80 per cent of the waste pickers are women; in Brazil, a small-scale study found that 56 per cent of the members of waste picker organizations are women (Dias 2011: 167).

Waste pickers form diverse organizations—possibly a reflection of the disparate manners and locations of their work. Organizations include cooperatives, associations, unions, community-based projects, as groups within an NGO, and even worker-controlled companies (Samson 2009). For many groups, the primary motivation for organizing collectively is to guarantee worker access to recyclable materials and to improve their economic viability and livelihoods. Cooperatives (or cooperative-like associations) are the most common organizations, especially in Latin America. Cooperative members share facilities, sell the recyclables they collect, and/or engage with local authorities for contracts and support. However, organizational strength differs across continents. Whilst many Latin American countries have relatively well-developed organizations—albeit still representing a minority—organization is embryonic in Africa where it follows no set pattern. Important for this contrast, opportunities for making a living from informal recycling are limited in many African countries, where the industrial base and market for recyclables are small, and where the type of waste produced is less fertile for recycling than that produced in upper income, industrialized countries.

Solidarity and political mobilization tend to take place either through national federations or alliances of base organizations, such as the National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials in Brazil (MNCR),

or through a dual union-cooperative organizational structure such as that of SEWA or the trade union of waste pickers, KKP KP, and its related cooperative, SWaCH in India. As we discussed in an earlier section, the Latin American Network of Waste Pickers (RedLacre) functions as a regional, social movement based alliance. Like the MNCR, and whilst independent in its decision-making, it relies heavily for financial and administrative support on NGOs and on the AVINA Foundation. India's national alliance, the Alliance of Indian Waste pickers (AIW), is made up of both NGOs and MBOs. While its mixed base differs from the Latin America example, it nevertheless has remained an issue based alliance, without formal structure and is based on the idea of 'growing organically' (Bonner and Spooner 2012: 75). Yet, despite these areas of strong organization, a majority of the worlds' waste pickers remain unorganized.

Structure and Governance

The founding members of the GAWP are the RedLacre, with their most active participants being the MNCR and the Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB) in Latin America and the KKP KP and SEWA in India. The GAWP is coordinated and resourced primarily by WIEGO.²⁰ The GAWP has no governance structure and decisions have been taken either in meetings where leaders are gathered such as meetings of the Interim Steering Committee²¹ or through consultations between WIEGO and individual leaders from the stronger organizations.

Goals and Achievements

The 2008 First World Conference of Waste Pickers' Declaration set out a series of key goals that were subsequently re-iterated in global meetings: recognition; economic and social inclusion, especially integration into solid waste management systems; promotion of recycling and rejection of technologies such as incineration; changes to policies and laws and inclusion in decision making; strengthening of waste picker organizations across the world, sharing experiences; and increasing visibility.²²

The GAWP emerged from discussions of waste picker groups and advocates that were triggered by threats to waste pickers' livelihoods as well as opportunities presenting themselves through the environmental movement over the past decade. Large corporations seized financial opportunities in waste management and were introducing new technological "solutions". Municipalities were privatizing waste collection services and looking for collection and disposal solutions. Environmental concerns were driving moves to recycling rather than to dumping. These developments had also triggered an interest in waste pickers (informal sector) from the World Bank, global development agencies and NGOs, and some big corporations.

The Global Alliance has been an important tool in beginning to create a unified global waste picker identity and providing a voice and sense of power through which to raise their visibility and promote their image as valuable contributors to environmental improvement and sustainability. It has also provided a "body" that has some legitimacy as a voice of waste pickers with which development agencies as well as corporate or corporate supporting groups can communicate and engage. Although this kind of engagement (with the Clinton Global Initiative or the World Bank, for example) is still limited, it is nevertheless likely to increase, creating possible opportunities but also threats that need to be countered.

For three years (2009-2011), a global focus was the United Nations Climate Change Conferences where global delegations of waste pickers, under the banner of the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers and Allies, had a visible and vocal presence. They promoted recycling as an effective method for climate change mitigation and informal recyclers as valuable environmental agents. Through these forums, the GAWP has made interventions into discussions on alternative funding mechanisms that waste pickers might access. This has begun to change the perception of waste pickers and of their role by some governments and inter-

²⁰ WIEGO also manages its website (<http://www.globalrec.org>).

²¹ The Interim Steering Committee, hosted by WIEGO, did not result in a stable decision making structure and was disbanded in 2012.

²² For full text see <http://globalrec.org/mission/>.

national development agencies. The major ally in this advocacy work is the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), a global environmental justice organization of 800 grassroots groups and NGOs whose “ultimate vision is a just, toxic-free world without incineration” (GAIA). The GAWP members have also made their presence felt at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Rio+20 (2012), at the World Urban Forum (2012), and more recently at the ILC 2013 Conference where the main subject of discussion was “Green Jobs and Sustainable Development”.

Also through the Alliance, successful models of integration into municipal systems, court actions, new legislations, and organizing strategies have been shared in many ways including through the 2012 Global Strategic Workshop of the GAWP. Experiences from one country or municipality are being spread through actions taken by waste pickers and by exposing municipal officials, and sometimes business representatives, to such models. Indian officials have visited Brazil with waste picker representatives; aided by WIEGO and the MNCR in Sao Paulo and the ARB in Bogota, South African officials also visited Brazil and Colombia.

Key Influences and Challenges

The threats posed to the livelihoods of waste pickers in many parts of the world, such as the privatization of waste management and the growing role of local and multinational corporations, have created the need for a counter strategy and for waste pickers to develop a collective voice. The opportunities presented by global environmental forums have also been important in building a global alliance, however fragile. In this, the support of global NGOs such as WIEGO and GAIA has been crucial. Could global organizing take place without such support? The support required at local and national levels may give us an answer. The established Brazilian and Colombian movements, for example, have required start up and ongoing financial and technical support. Because many of the base organizations are not financially or technically self-sufficient, it makes sense to expect that a global network will require ongoing financial and other support. And whilst such support is not the only, or even main, determinant of successful main determinant, of successful national and global networks, it has frequently been an important factor in their formation and sustainability.

Whilst the underlying situation and needs of waste pickers provide common ground for global organizing, the wide cross-national differences provide countervailing forces: the uneven level of development of waste pickers’ organizations across countries/continents; differing opportunities for development due to manufacturing and market differences; cultural, language, class and gender differences; and differing political organizing traditions. The very localized struggles around members’ immediate concerns will always take priority over global activities, and the challenge of how to best use scarce resources is the subject of discussion.

The GAWP has shown that through the networking model, waste pickers have been able to present a public image and voice far beyond the size and strength of their organizational base, to keep connections and information flowing amongst “members”, to mobilize solidarity support amongst themselves and from a range of allies, and to jointly engage in strategic and/or opportunistic global activities. However, despite the informality of this model, it does require strong coordination and resources to make it work. In this case, coordination and resources are provided by WIEGO and not from within the alliance itself.

NGO Model: HomeNet South Asia

HomeNet South Asia (HNSA) is a transnational regional network of organizations of, and working for, home-based workers in South Asian countries. It provides an interesting example of a regional network attempting to make the transition from a predominately NGO model to one where MBOs of home-based workers have a greater say in its governance. Home-based workers are perhaps the most invisible and least able to organize into significant MBOs (although there are exceptions). NGOs providing support to home-based workers are the dominant form of organization and thus provide the network base in most countries.

The focus of HomeNet's advocacy work has been national governments, using regional forums and opportunities. It has also gained recognition by and successfully engaged with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Home-based Workers and their Organizations

According to 2002 estimates, there were about 100 million home-based workers worldwide, with 50 per cent of those being in South Asia. The vast majority of home-based workers—up to 85 per cent in South Asia—are women (WIEGO). More recent statistical work on urban areas finds that home-based work, which cuts across varied industrial sectors, represents a significant share of urban employment in many countries; it ranges from 18 per cent in India (2009-10) to six per cent in South Africa (ILO-WIEGO forthcoming). Home-based workers are those who produce in their own homes or in adjoining structures. There are two types of home-based workers: the first type produce goods themselves, buying their own raw materials and selling their products to make a living (own account workers). Those in the second group are piece rate or subcontracted workers who are provided with raw materials and sometimes with equipment; they are involved in production or partial production of final products for firms and usually work through an agent (homeworkers). Many HBWs are involved in both types of work arrangements. They may produce for the local market or for a national or international company; in the latter case, these workers will be at the end of a long supply chain and usually do not know the final destination of the goods they produce. The types of work are very varied: sewing garments and stitching shoes; jewelry assembly; producing food and snacks; and producing handicrafts, amongst other examples.

Home-based workers have common problems: isolation, which renders them open to exploitation by buyers of goods or agents/firms; lack of legal and social protection; and lack of housing and infrastructure. For own account workers, access to markets is of major concern. Sub-contracted homeworkers commonly point to irregularity of work, provision of equipment, piece rate, late or reduced payment (due to alleged quality defects), and deadline pressures as some of the issues commonly affecting them.

As noted above, NGOs play an important role in supporting home-based workers through skills training, helping access markets, providing welfare services, and in some cases, acting as agents who supply the work. The focus of the NGOs may not primarily be home-based workers but women or poverty alleviation. Whilst some HBWs have formed unions, such as the Home Based Women Bangle Workers Union in Pakistan, or are part of a multi-sector informal workers' union, such as SEWA in India, most remain isolated or perhaps are members of small savings and credit groups or coops, or informal community-based groups.

HomeNet Status and Structure

It is not possible to understand the structure of HomeNet South Asia without knowing the history of the attempts at a global movement. Led by SEWA and supported by NGOs and some unions, HomeNet International was formed in the early 1990s around the campaign for an ILO Convention on Home Work (C177), which was achieved in 1996. Following the successful adoption of the Convention, discussions on the structural model to be adopted by HomeNet International ended in division. Some wanted a loose network of home-based worker organizations, NGOs, and individual activists, whilst others, notably SEWA and allies, favored a network of MBOs of home-based workers. In 2000, led by SEWA and supported by UNIFEM and WIEGO, HomeNet South Asia was formed as a project located in SEWA. It formally launched as an independent body in 2007.

HomeNet South Asia has an unusual structure. For purposes of receiving and distributing funds, it is registered outside of South Asia and governed by a Trust Deed, with five Trustees as decision makers. The Advisory Board, made up of representatives of five Country HomeNets (CHN) has not functioned

well, and in 2012, a new structure and composition were adopted “in order to make HNSA more representational of its constituency and move towards becoming a MBO, all the MBO and CHN members will elect an Advisory Board every 3 years... As the name suggests it will advise the Board of Trustees, who are the [principal] decision makers” (HNSA).

In this new structure, NGOs may be members of HomeNet, but only MBOs and CHNs will have voting rights. Affiliates will pay a membership fee. In addition, HNSA is leading a program to help transform the country HomeNets, dominated by NGOs, into democratic, MBO-led networks.

Goals and Achievements

The 2012 vision statement has three important planks: 1) solidarity across South Asia; 2) enactment of comprehensive policy for home-based workers; and 3) that the majority of country HomeNet boards and their members be composed of membership-based organizations.

HNSA’s purpose is multipronged: information sharing and learning; creating solidarity; removing isolation and facilitating networking; advocacy by enhancing voice and visibility; and playing a role in raising resources for itself and its affiliates (HNSA).

HNSA has not been directly active in global negotiating forums, but it has concentrated on building solidarity, networking, sharing and capacity building amongst its affiliates and, to some extent, those of HomeNet South East Asia through workshops, exposure visits, and common events such as exhibitions. It has focused on highlighting home-based workers’ issues and raising their visibility and collective voice in the region with national governments through convening dialogues with government officials from different countries, home-based worker representatives, unions, NGOs, and UN agencies to push for better policies, social protection, and ratification of C177. It has also targeted and successfully negotiated an agreement with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Development Fund to finance a project (SABAH) to assist HBWs in South Asian countries access markets. It has also played a role in mobilizing resources for affiliates and providing access to international organizations such as WIEGO, which can provide the country HomeNets with research and capacity building support.

Influences and Challenges

Because of HBWs’ weak and isolated position and lack of identity as workers, grassroots organizing into strong MBOs, with some notable exceptions, has been limited. NGOs have predominated in the country HomeNets and HNSA. The concept of democratic worker MBOs is not widely understood, and for the most part, the structures and governance of the networks have been in the hands of NGOs and influential individuals. However, the commitment of SEWA and HNSA leadership to democratic representation by MBOs has resulted in the changes noted above.

The final characteristics of HNSA and its members are still in process of formation despite 13 years of existence. This process of change towards membership-based organizations and networks is likely to be an ongoing challenge; to a large extent, it is dependent on extending and deepening grassroots organizing in each country, in order to ensure a viable base, and on reaching out to those unions organizing HBWs. As with all the networks, it will encounter challenges in generating enough internal resources to become financially autonomous. In addition, because home-based workers are the most invisible of all the groups of informal workers, making an impact on policy makers, accessing markets for own account workers, and exerting influence on key players in national and global supply chains will be challenging tasks.

Opportunities and Challenges

We close with considering that the terrain in which informal workers' global networks have formed has presented opportunities that organizers have capitalized on, but this terrain has also presented challenges. Some of these challenges are likely to remain issues to contend with in the future.

A broader context of changes in several international arenas has made it possible for informal worker movements to find and act upon particular windows of opportunity. An increased global concern about waste management as linked to environmental sustainability has led to more resources—financial and technical—for waste pickers both locally (in some places) and globally. Similarly, an increased focus on human rights in international forums has been important in highlighting abuses of domestic workers as well as increased trade union interest and donor support for the IDWN and supportive NGOs. Conversely, street vendors have not garnered quite the same support although this limitation has been in part countered by strong trade union links.

Within this context, informal workers also have their own reasons for seeking global organizing and representation. For example, domestic workers felt it necessary to have their own voice and presence during the negotiations for the ILO Convention if they were to secure a standard where their demands were addressed. Sub-contracted homeworkers at the bottom end of complex global supply chains also need to organize globally if they are to challenge their “real” employers. To date, they have been unable to do so fully on their own; challenges to multi-national corporations are most often made by NGOs, sometimes in alliance with trade unions and efforts such as the Ethical Trade Initiative (ETI) or the Clean Clothes Campaign.

Opportunities

As our case studies illustrate in detail, recognizing and seizing opportunities matter in determining access to global or regional venues for advocacy and engagement. The decision by the ILO Governing Body to place “Decent Work for Domestic Workers” as a standard setting item on the agenda of the ILC provided an opportunity for domestic workers, who had also already articulated this demand at their first international conference in 2006, to directly engage in the tripartite negotiations, leading to a successful outcome. In the case of StreetNet, seizing the opportunity to participate in discussions at the ILCs has provided a high profile advocacy platform where small gains have been made by the inclusion of informal workers in final texts, and large gains were made through the recognition and legitimacy accorded to StreetNet in the labour arena. For waste pickers, the UN Climate Change Conferences opened up a space for waste picker leaders from different countries to jointly put forward their claim as valuable contributors to climate change mitigation—an argument that some have successfully used in local struggles for inclusion—and against the implementation of incineration schemes. This space was opened up by the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA), which reached out to the waste pickers through WIEGO, suggesting a joint delegation that could build on mutual interests. Alliances, partnerships, and support for the cause are often critical in opening up such opportunities. Policy decisions and global trends affect what happens locally. As this is not something obvious and immediate to informal workers in their everyday lives and immediate struggles, the opportunity for global organizing or advocacy may first be articulated and facilitated by other actors.

Challenges

Building and sustaining global worker networks is a challenging endeavor for both formal and informal workers. All strive ultimately for democratic, worker-led structures and governance, solidarity, and shared learning. All have to overcome the barriers posed by differences in language, culture, politics, and organizing traditions. Resources are almost always scarce: global organizing is expensive and electronic communication has not (yet) replaced the need for meetings, congresses, and so on. In addition, all global worker networks have to ensure they are relevant for and link to grassroots members that are facing the more immediate local and national struggles. Due to the nature of informal work and informal worker organizations, additional challenges present themselves and the common challenges are more intensely felt.

Global Networks in Formative Stages

The new wave of informal workers' organizing is still young and in its formative phase; time and institutionalization matter. Domestic workers have had a toehold within the trade union movement for many years, which enabled the global network to secure its base in the IUF and helped the rapid buildup of domestic workers' unions in some countries. Associations of street vendors have been in existence for many years and have provided the basis for national and global organizing. Home-based workers, with little organized base and minimal trade union support, have as yet to succeed in developing a global organization or a truly worker-led regional body. Waste pickers' organizations are underdeveloped or non-existent in most countries, with exceptions in parts of Latin America and India, where they have existed for 20 years. Thus, we report on global worker structures as they are now with the expectation they will evolve over the years.

Capacity of Member Organizations

Unavoidably, the strength of local organizations matters for the strength and sustainability of the network. However, the absence of a strong, widespread grassroots base has not prevented the formation of global networks in their different forms nor their achievement of goals beyond the level at which their base should dictate. In other words, the sum can be more than its parts.

On the other hand, building strong MBOs at the local and national levels is essential for global networks to become and stay a significant and credible representative force—it is a two-way process. The challenge, then, is how to maximize the global reach of networks and their limited resources to provide support for strengthening and growing local organizations. StreetNet has grown slowly and steadily. It has emphasized democratic, representative structures within StreetNet itself and within its affiliates, including gender equality. It has used capacity building, constant communication through newsletters, text messages and field visits, and solidarity campaigns to help build the network from above and below.

Representativeness

Related to organization strength are questions of structure, governance, and accountability. As with all worker organizations, it matters that representatives are credible and are held to account. Whilst one of the successes of the global networks has been their ability to have impact far exceeding the strength of their members, there is the familiar danger that an unrepresentative leadership may become increasingly out of touch with membership concerns. There are considerable constraints on the mobility of poor people in the South; Lindell (2011: 14) notes that “under such conditions, participation by the majority becomes highly uneven, as well as indirect and dependent on a limited number of people”. This danger is lessened where member organizations have strong traditions of representation and where global networks develop representation structures.

From NGO support to MBO structure

NGOs play important roles in supporting organizations of informal workers at all levels, but should they be fully included as network members? This has been a recurring subject of discussion within and amongst network MBOs and associated NGOs. There seems to be agreement that networks should ideally be composed of MBOs, with MBO leaders and MBO decision-making. In practice, the networks have implemented this differently, the roots of the founder member organizations being of particular importance. StreetNet resolved this issue prior to its formal launch through a series of regional discussions with potential member organizations. Waste picker organizations strongly believe in this principle, but they have not found a way to translate it into agreed global practice. HomeNet South Asia, where many founding members are NGOs, has recently agreed on a new structure that will increase the decision making power of MBOs. Members of the IDWN proposed formally launching the federation with MBOs only as voting members.

Sustainability: Resources and the Link to Union Federations

Sustainability is an ongoing challenge for organizations of informal workers at the local as well as the global levels. All the global networks discussed here rely on external funding and on technical support from NGOs. In at least one case, being hosted by a global union federation (the IDWN within the IUF) does not provide financial resources per se, but does provide access to a structure that is a source of information, support, and strategic advice. The nature and extent of such relationships affects how a global network can develop.

The sustainability prospects of global networks entail access to resources beyond the dues of their member organizations. The member organizations themselves face limited dues collection options because membership is not large, members have low or poverty earnings, and, in practice, dues compliance is voluntary. There are no automatic dues collection mechanisms because there is no “employer” in most cases, and where there is an employer—as for domestic workers, or for home-based workers when there is a contractor that acts as an employer of sorts—he or she has little incentive to partake in establishing a dues collection system.

Becoming Part of the Labour Movement?

There are practical as well as political reasons for global IW networks to consider more formal relationships with the global labour movement. Exactly what these relationships would entail likely varies with each global union federation—and each global network. Practical reasons for more formal relationships concern access to the structures in which global union federations are active as well as access to support for organizing. Politically, benefits and challenges come with closer association to the labour movement. Some of the benefits include recognition of informal workers as part of the global worker movement and the possibilities for sharing on strategy development, organizing, and leadership development. The challenges, which could form the subject of an entire paper, include the issues that have driven informal workers to form their own organization to begin with; for example, many waste picker groups in Latin America, such as the MNCR in Brazil, are closer to social movements of the poor than to trade unions as they perceive trade unions to be aligned to political parties (Horn 2008). Challenges also include a number of hurdles internal to the labour movement itself, including how many in the movement perceive informal workers and how some labour movement activists may have difficulty in relating to the specific circumstances and regulatory setting (or lack thereof) for informal work.

A Next Step? Tackling Corporations

To date, informal worker global networks have focused their advocacy efforts primarily towards development and governmental bodies. However, local and multi-national corporations have immense power over some informal worker groups’ livelihoods. Homeworkers at the bottom of the supply chains, for instance, could benefit from global advocacy and engagement at different points in the chain and with their ultimate employer. In addition, waste pickers, at the bottom of an unregulated recycling chain, are increasingly threatened by multi-national (and local) corporations that are gaining contracts for waste collection and disposal, often in collaboration with municipal officials and politicians. Waste pickers in Bogota have a long-standing and recently successful struggle against such a threat, and vendors in Durban, South Africa, recently defeated a move to replace their markets with a shopping mall (Chen et al. 2013). Although a challenging endeavor, global networks may in the future provide the vehicle to begin to tackle multi-national companies globally.

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About WIEGO: Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing is a global research-policy-action network that seeks to improve the status of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. WIEGO builds alliances with, and draws its membership from, three constituencies: membership-based organizations of informal workers, researchers and statisticians working on the informal economy, and professionals from development agencies interested in the informal economy. WIEGO pursues its objectives by helping to build and strengthen networks of informal worker organizations; undertaking policy analysis, statistical research and data analysis on the informal economy; providing policy advice and convening policy dialogues on the informal economy; and documenting and disseminating good practice in support of the informal workforce. For more information see www.wiego.org.



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